THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (SHRI E. AHAMMED): (a) to (b) Economic and Commercial Cooperation with Pakistan is high on the Government's agenda. As part of the Composite Dialogue with Pakistan, Commerce Secretaries level meeting on Economic and Commercial Cooperation was held on August 11-12, 2004, in Islamabad where both sides discussed trade related issues. Several proposals were put forth by the Indian Commerce Secretary to his counterpart in the areas of Trade promotion, Trade routes, Business Interactions, Telecommunications, Civil Aviation, etc.

On the margins of the Fourth SAARC Commerce Ministers Meeting in Islamabad held on 22-23 November, 2004, it was decided to form a Joint Study Group on Trade and Economic Cooperation. The Joint Study Group met from February 22-23 in New Delhi and held detailed discussions on promotion of trade and economic cooperation for mutual benefits of both countries. The two sides identified issues relating to bilateral trade and deliberated upon the future roadmap in order to enhance trade and economic cooperation. In this meeting, we also brought in our agenda of bilateral cooperation such as identification of trade items, opening of trade and transit points, opening of branches of banks, trade exhibitions and other interactions between business and entrepreneur communities in both countries.

(c) to (e) Indian High Commission follows up on all matters of concern to India, including economic and commercial issues. The Indian High Commission also has an officer who looks after economic and commerce related matters.

Fishing boats captured by Pakistan

3145. SHRI V. HANUMANTHA RAO: Will the Minister of EXTERNAL AFFAIRS be pleased to state:

(a) the number of Indian fishing boats presently under the control of Pakistan;

(b) whether our embassy has been able to secure their release in the last six months;

(c) if so, the details thereof;

(d) whether Government have plans to persuade Pakistan that seizure of Indian fishing boats is against accepted forms of international relations in the present day world; and

(e) the steps proposed to carry out high level contacts with the Pakistani Government to persuade them to return all Indian fishing vessels as a gesture of goodwill?

THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (SHRI E. AHAMMED): (a) About 184 boats are presently under the control of Pakistan.

(b) and (c) No, Sir.

(d) Government is constantly taking up with the Government of Pakistan, through diplomatic channels, the matter of release of the remaining Indian fishing boats.

(e) During the visit of External Affairs Minister to Pakistan from February 15-17, 2005, the issue of early release and repatriation of all the Indian fishermen along with their boats was again taken up.

Arrest of Indian fishermen by Sri Lanka

3146. DR. K. MALAISAMY: Will the Minister of EXTERNAL AFFAIRS be pleased to state:

(a) whether the fishermen of Indian origin have often been arrested, injured and kept in custody, boats seized by the Sri Lankan Navy on the ground that they have been crossing the border while fishing;

(b) if so, the number of fishermen arrested, injured, released; the number of boats seized; the number of boats released; year-wise, during the last five years;

(c) whether it is a fact that enough initiatives have not been taken by the successive Governments at the Centre to solve this problem once and for all; and

(d) the permanent solution envisaged to solve this perennial problem once and for all?

THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (SHRI E. AHAMMED): (a) Indian fishermen who stray across the International Maritime Boundary Line to fish illegally in Sri Lankan waters are sometimes apprehended by Sri Lankan authorities.